

Friday, November 10, 2006

Secretary Kawamura's Blog from Mexico

¡Hola from México!



The final day of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Trade Mission to Mexico was long and intense, but was filled with many exciting prospects for California agriculture. At 5 a.m., we left for Central de Abasto, Mexico's largest produce wholesale market, where we saw and smelled a cross-section of fruits and vegetables from all over Mexico, and around the world, including the U.S. and Chile. Covering over 500 acres, it is one of the world's largest wholesale markets. The bustling market supplies up to 80 percent of the food for more than 20 million people in Mexico City. We visited several wholesale vendors that handle California products, such as peaches, plums, table grapes, persimmons, kiwis, and pears.

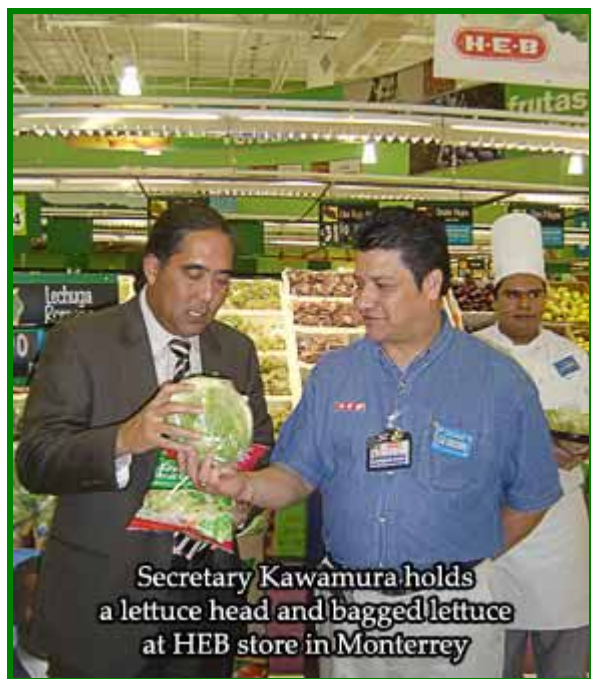
We had the opportunity to talk with several Mexican produce importers/ buyers to discuss the challenges they face. At the top of their list were fumigation requirements of imported fruit. According to the buyers, fumigation adversely affects the quality of the fruit and sharply reduces the shelf life. Efforts are underway through USDA and Mexican government negotiations, to reduce the fumigation requirements to a minimum. This could ultimately increase sales volume by several times for California products.

And of course, spinach was a topic on everyone's mind. We learned that the Mexican government's ban on spinach imports from the United States has also depressed sales of domestically produced Mexican spinach. So, in the case of spinach, the ban is negative for both of our countries and all should welcome putting an end to the ban.

After the tour of Central de Abasto, we were in a non-stop rush to reach all our destinations scheduled. First, it was breakfast with the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Antonio O. Garza Jr., where he spoke frankly on NAFTA and the intertwined relationship of U.S. and Mexico. Immediately after, we were off to Monterrey by plane. Upon arrival, we had lunch with the Secretary of Agriculture in the state of Nuevo Leon Guillermo Zambrano Lozano.

Then we were off to film "Sabrosas Conversaciones Con Lulu", where Chef Lulu Pedraza and I showcased a delicious salad using California fruits and vegetables. Later that evening, Governor Schwarzenegger filmed a segment with Chef Lulu, where I hear spinach was the major topic of conversation.





Secretary Kawamura holds a lettuce head and bagged lettuce at HEB store in Monterrey

After filming, we raced to the HEB supermarket where we were welcomed with open arms by the store manager and heads of all the departments. We were joined by the USDA-FAS-ATO (Agricultural Trade Office) Director Dan Martinez, who helped put together the promotion at HEB and TV filming with Chef Lulu. The agriculture delegation was happy to see their products, including wine, tree fruit, strawberries, cheese and lettuce featured in the store's promotion. We were told that the strawberry promotion was so popular that HEB had to keep strawberries on reserve for our visit. There were also talks of a big California wine promotion during the holiday season. Our visit and the promotion ensured the return of loose and bagged California lettuce to store shelves; lettuce had been briefly banned a month ago.

We then left HEB, rushed to the airport and made it on the plane back home without a moment to spare. Luckily, no one had to spend a surprise evening in Monterrey.

It feels good to be back in our Golden State. The trade mission reminds us of the unique diversity of California agriculture and how critically important it is to not only our state but abroad as well. California truly feeds the world, which makes protecting our safe and abundant food supply even that much more vital.

¡Salud!

Secretario A.G. Kawamura



California Promotion at HEB Supermarket in Monterrey, Mexico, November 10, 2006



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF
FOOD & AGRICULTURE